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ABSTRACT

The increased mobility of the American population combined with the school choice movement has contributed to increased consumerism in parents' selection of schools. A consulting firm program, "SchoolMatch," matches information from databases on public and private schools with information from questionnaires of clients, which include expanding corporations and relocating families. Findings relevant to educational policy makers show that parents most frequently request information on small class size, competitive teacher salaries, family-oriented communities, medium-sized school systems, and pupil instruction expenditures. The continued trend in educational consumerism is identified as a product of the intensified business school relationship, growing school choice movement, increased parental demand for special programs, and increased school district interest. One table summarizes the 1990 mean responses of parents' school choice preferences and a brochure presents national averages on enrollment, class size, academic performance, elementary accreditation, award-winning schools, district expenditures, and other school system demographics. (22 references) (LMI)

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SCHOOL CHOICE: WHAT PARENTS AND CORPORATIONS WANT

by

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Midwest Suburban Superintendents
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SCHOOL CHOICE: WHAT PARENTS & CORPORATIONS WANT

William L. Bainbridge

The increased mobility of our population combined with the school choice movement has resulted in increasingly large numbers of parents who want to shop for public schools as they do for consumer products. When given an opportunity to select a school or school system, parents in the 1990s are asking for comparative information upon which to base their choice.

Since 1986, our consulting firm has maintained databases on each U.S. public school system and over 7,000 accredited private schools. SchoolMatch provides information to corporations selecting sites and families relocating into specific areas. In the process of assessing the clients' preferences, we ask them to complete questionnaires. From the preferences they provide, we "match" them with schools in any part of the country that most reflect those preferences. Through an alternative "mirror image" approach the client is given an opportunity to replicate the characteristics of a known school community in an unknown area. In either case, the clients are telling us what they are looking for in schools.

Thousands of parents have participated in the SchoolMatch process. SchoolMatch is available through many corporate human resource offices, corporate family support services offered through the leading provider Work/Family Directions, Inc., and large database networks such as the Human Resource Information Network (HRIN) and the non-profit Online Computer Library Center (OCLC). Individual consumers are referred to our toll free number by a variety of sources including state departments of education, national education organizations, real estate firms, and the news media. An early 1991 feature on NBC's Today Show, for example, generated large numbers of inquiries.

In 1989, it became apparent that information valuable to education policy makers could be provided by simply tabulating the results of parent responses to the SchoolMatch questionnaires. It would appear that the real test of "what parents want" as consumers of public education might lie in their assessment of alternatives when they actually have a choice.

We have been surprised by the results of our annual data review and analysis. When parents are selecting schools for their children, we've discovered, they don't conform to conventional wisdom on what constitutes "best" or "most important." We've learned that parents don't necessarily look for the "biggest," the "highest," or the "best" when they have a chance to choose their children's schools, and they don't necessarily agree on what constitutes "biggest," "highest," or "best" either.

Just as no two children are identical, no two families have exactly the same definition of an ideal school system. Preferences regarding indicators such as academic rigor, school system expenditures, school size and community characteristics vary with each family.

In our experience with relocating families and corporations, we have come to the conclusion that school policy makers need to do some serious market research regarding the desires of prospects and clients. School officials, for example, will often send us literature which equates "best" with "biggest." Statements such as "the third largest school system in the metropolitan area" are common - as though size were a qualitative measure and not a quantitative one.

Our surveys of parents and corporations rarely indicate that anyone is looking for extremely large or extremely small school systems, though they may choose such systems for their other characteristics. Why then, are the printed materials from the districts touting a characteristic which is not viewed as appealing to the consumer?

Likewise, some people equate "best" with "most competitive." Our experience as administrators probably would have led to the same conclusion. As school information specialists, however, we have learned that few parents want their child in the most academically rigorous school or the one with the highest test scores. Parents tend to want their children in an environment that allows their children to excel and develop confidence in their abilities. Many parents who have previous experience in choosing schools often relate

anecdotes of enrolling their children in "top schools," only to find that their offspring are not performing well and are unhappy.

Nearly every week we get calls from school administrators suggesting that we recommend their school system to a corporation which is considering a major move into their area. We admire their initiative, but they lose us when they say, "Of course, you know, we have the best schools in the metropolitan area." The underlying premise of these calls seems to be that everyone knows how to define "best" when it comes to school systems. But our experience with thousands of relocating families and hundreds of corporations leads us to conclude otherwise.

Our analyses in 1989 and 1990 alike led to the conclusion that only one school characteristic seems to have nearly universal appeal to parents - low pupil/teacher ratios. It would appear that the efforts of teacher unions and associations over the last three decades have been quite effective in convincing the American public - research not with-standing - that small classes lead to better schools.

The results of our 1989 surveys were published by USA Today, The American School Board Journal, and The Bureau of National Affairs. We recently summarized the results of parents' surveys conducted in 1990. Exhibit 1 is a sample of the "guide" which is used to focus parent attention on categories in which they state preferences. Preferences range from "very low" to "very high" on a five point scale. Exhibit 2 is a summary of the 1990 mean responses of parents in each categorical area.

In an ongoing survey we find that 52.8 percent of the parents say they want a school system in the second-highest range (sixty-first to eightieth percentile) on composite scores on scholastic exams. Surprisingly, 70.2 percent of parents indicate the best school for their child would be one that is "average" to "above average" in pupil performance on scholarship examinations. Only 29.2 percent say they want their child in the highest range (eighty-first to ninety-ninth percentile) on this test of academic rigor. More parents (39.5 percent) select instructional expenditures in the highest range.

The message is clear but not often understood: It is more important to parents that their children are successful than that the school earns the highest marks. It is a myth that we can simply look to the schools with the highest test scores as the best for families.

Analysis of more than 5,300 parental responses also shows the following:

* A majority of parents (63.4 percent) indicate that "small" or "very small" class sizes for elementary school-age youngsters are preferable. By contrast, 58 percent of parents feel that "average" class sizes are suitable for junior and senior high school students.

* Parents want school systems where teacher salaries are competitive but not necessarily among the highest. On a scale of one to five, with five being the highest, 61.3 percent of parents select a four. Approxinmately a fifth of parents select the highest salary category.

* Family-oriented communities appear to be important to parents. Only 3.1 percent look for communities with fewer than average numbers of school-age children.

* Parents tend to avoid very large or very small public school systems. Only 0.5 percent prefer "very small" systems and 1.4 percent look for "very large" systems.

* Exemplary school facilities, guidance and counseling, and vocational education do not appear to be important to many parents. Respondents lean toward "average" in these areas. In most cases only parents whose children have special needs show much interest in special education programs. By contrast 61.4 percent feel that elementary school accreditation is "important" or "very important."

The higher mobility in this country and the school choice movement are bringing about a consumer-oriented approach to education. People who use our databases ae begining to understand the importance of comaring school size, teacher salaries, pupil instruction expenditures, and characteristics of academic rigor. Legislation in states permitting people to choose schools is sharpening skills of parents as consumers of education.

As we look to the 1990s, consumerism among parents and corporate interest in schools is likely to escalate:

* The tie between corporate productivity and the success of our nation's schools is becoming more pronounced. Efforts of groups such as the Business Roundtable, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Center for Work Force Preparation and Quality

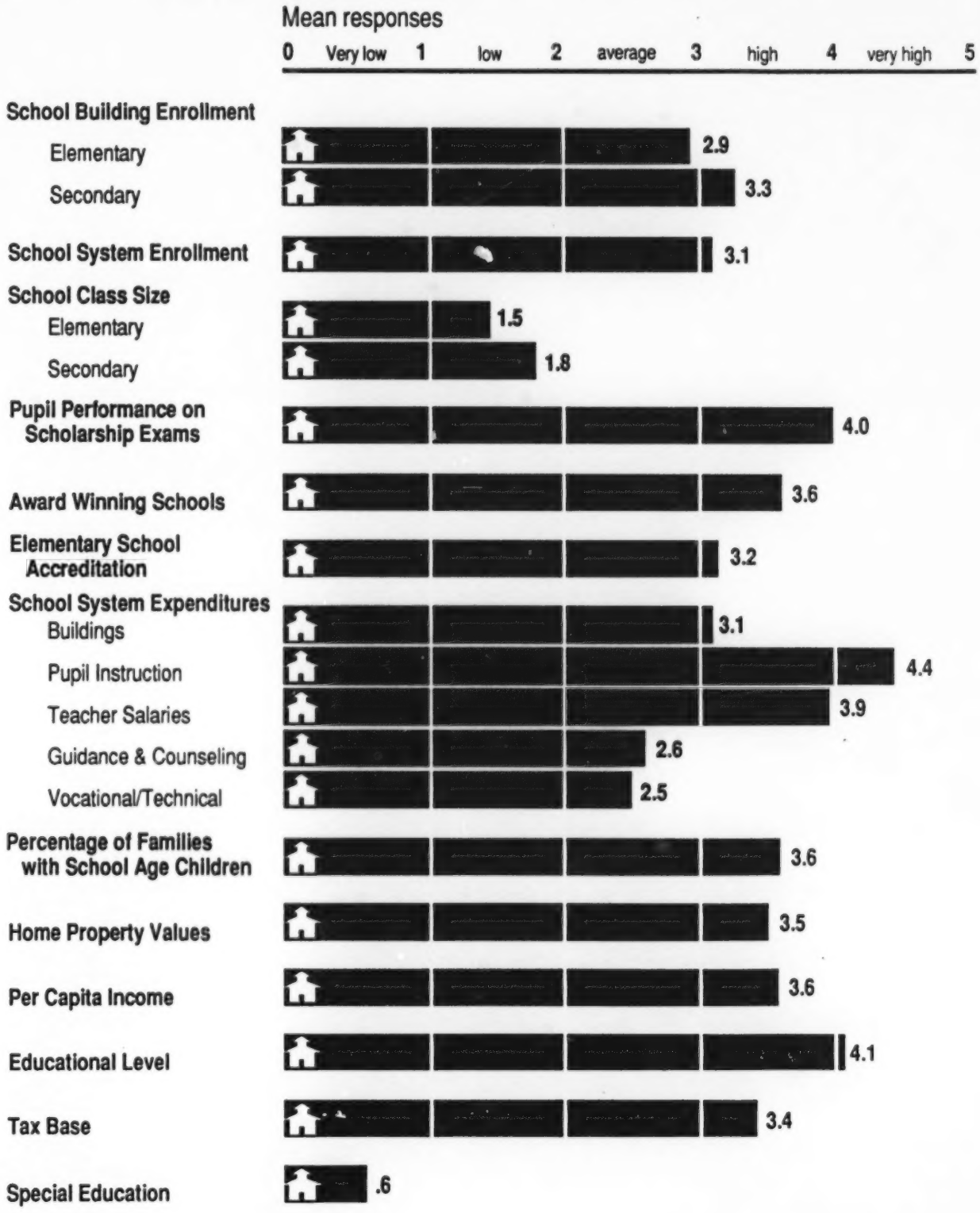
Education, and the Council for Aid to Education could move involvement of business in the schools from the level of novelty to one which begins clearly stating their needs and preferences - - and demanding results. Corporations are likely to tie school participation in philanthropy to their own strategic objectives.

* The school choice movement is not likely to abate. The recent advocacy position of the liberal Brookings Institution think tank has bolstered the efforts of conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation to win wide support for the concept. Such a movement cannot help but increase parent and corporate interest in stating preferences regarding schools.

* Parent inquiries on the SchoolMatch telephone lines indicate an increased interest in areas such as extended day programs, extracurricular activities, programs for the gifted, school safety, computers and interactive videos, and tax support issues.

* School systems will continue to show interest in opportunities to compare themselves with like school districts - wherever they exist throughout the country. SchoolMatch and some state departments of education have developed programs to provide such opportunities for valid comparisons of academic programs and community orientations.

What Parents Want—School Choice



School Match

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A Guide to Your Family Profile

Using Your

School Match

By Public Priority Systems, Inc.

Information

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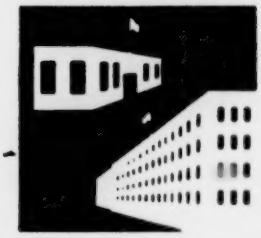
Your SchoolMatch Profile Report, generated from your responses in your completed Family Profile Questionnaire or Report Card are unique to you. Your school system preferences are going to be different than those of your friends, your neighbors and your business associates. It is strongly recommended that you visit those schools of most interest.

What Is "Average"?

In reviewing the data you may well ask, "What is average?" We have calculated the national averages for selected criteria and included them with explanations. In a few instances, data elements will be marked "not applicable." For example, test scores in urban school systems are often difficult to compare with scores in other systems because of considerably lower percentages of students taking the tests. Another example of "not applicable" data presentation would be elementary school pupil teacher ratios and elementary school building size statistics for school systems which do not have elementary grades.

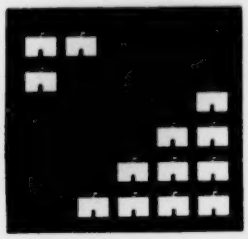
School Building Enrollment



Average elementary building size (enrollment)—412
Average secondary building size (enrollment)—708

There is the potential for some confusion when considering School Building Size and School System Size. The two are quite different and the distinctions are very important. When choosing School Building Size, you are making choices about staffing and pupil instruction. Large school buildings, like large colleges, provide some advantages in terms of breadth of course offerings and extracurricular opportunities. For every choice there is a tradeoff. What you may gain in breadth of course offerings, you may lose in personalized instruction.

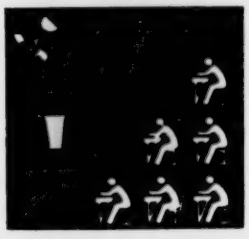
School System Enrollment



Average number of students per school system—2,509

The size of the school system generally does not have as much impact on the day-to-day activities of the student as does the size of the school building; however, school system size may impact upon ease of access to school board members and central administrators, and certain course offerings in areas such as the fine arts, vocational education, and other specialized fields. In a smaller school system, for example, while you may have more of a say in the policy decisions of the board of education and the school administration, you may limit your children's opportunities for certain specialized educational programs that are simply unavailable in the smaller system.

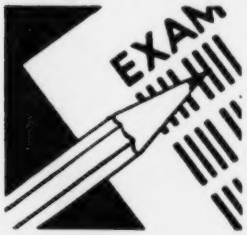
School Class Size



Average elementary pupil/teacher ratio—19.3 to 1
Average secondary pupil/teacher ratio—17.9 to 1

Educational research experts are not in complete agreement regarding the relationship between academic achievement and class size. Parents, on the other hand, frequently have quite strong beliefs on this subject. Some feel that a small class size, or low pupil/teacher ratio, is conducive to more personalized instruction. Others prefer the increased diversity and competition that often frequents larger classes.

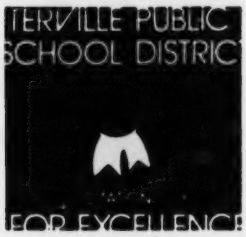
Pupil Performance on Scholarship Examinations



Pupil performance on scholarship examinations—Average SAT 900 / ACT 18.6

This is another example of the trade-offs and limitations which are created as you select schools. While at first glance, you might be tempted to select school systems which produce students who rank very high on nationally accepted tests, it is important to understand what you are getting, or not getting, when you are making this choice. What you probably are not getting is all of the school systems that provide a quality education. What you may be getting is a district with a more competitive atmosphere.

Award Winning Schools



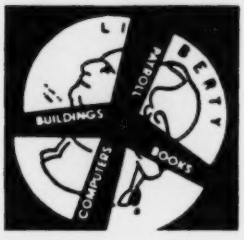
In recent years, various philanthropic organizations and the state and the federal governments have begun recognizing and rewarding schools for meritorious achievement, These indicators of recognition are limited nationally to a fairly small number of school systems. If you believe school system awards are indicators of quality education, you may wish to select a school system possessing these characteristics. However, you would limit yourself to a smaller number of school systems.

Elementary School Accreditation

Only 14% of elementary schools

One indicator of recognition which is limited to a relatively small number of schools is the accreditation of elementary schools. While the accreditation process has been in place for quite some time at the high school level, it is a relatively new phenomenon at the elementary school level. As a result, relatively few elementary schools are currently accredited. If you believe elementary school accreditation is an indicator of quality education, you may wish to select a school system possessing these characteristics. However, you will limit yourself to a smaller number of school systems.

School System Expenditures



Average per pupil expenditures—$ 4,243

Like many other public institutions, school systems are heavily dependent upon public financial support in their effort to achieve success. While no direct correlation exists between dollars expended and educational excellence, many families have very strong feelings about this subject. Some feel that they do not spend enough. The six major areas of school system expenditures include: (1) pupil instruction, (2) teacher salaries, (3) library and media services, (4) school buildings and facilities, (5) guidance and counseling, and (6) vocational technical education. Your personal priorities about what schools should be emphasizing or de-emphasizing as reflected in their financial allocations should guide your preferences within each of these six catagories of school system spending.

Percentage of Families with School-Age Children

Average 34%

As population shifts and residential developments occur, some school systems tend to attract many young families with school-age children, while others do not. Some established communities are places where people raise their children but remain in residence after their children leave. This leads to a declining percentage of school-age children. Your choice in this area reflects the type of school community you wish.

Home Property Values in the School System

If you relocate, you are also making a decision about the type of community in which you wish to reside. Some families wish to live in communities with high property values, while other families wish to live in an area where the property values may not be so high.

School System Per Capita Income

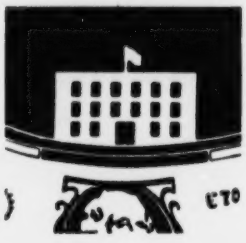
Average income level of school system resident—$16,489

Like home property values, school system average per capita income is a family lifestyle consideration as much as it is a reflection of the kind of school system that exists within a particular area. Many families tend to gravitate toward what is comfortable and familiar.

Educational Level of School System Residents

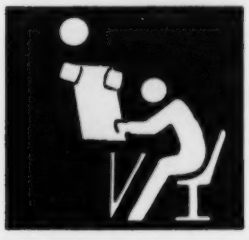
While the educational level of the residents within a school system is yet another reflection of the environment and lifestyle of that community, it is also sometimes an indicator of the availability of certain specialized educational programs. Individuals with elementary, high school, technical school, 4 year college and/or graduate or professional educations tend to have different attitudes towards schooling. In general, the more education one has the more likely he or she is to support public school financial issues and programs.

School System Tax Base



There are many different types of tax systems used to finance education. In fact, there are probably about as many ways of financing school systems as there are state educational systems. In some states, you can vote on new taxes. In some states, a school board, city council or other body controls taxes. SchoolMatch has taken the total tax base from the various educational finance systems in the United States and has developed a complete and accurate picture of the financial resources available. Generally, the school system tax base is a reflection of the amount of taxes paid by the taxpayers of that particular school system.

Special Education Programs



Many parents of handicapped students are concerned about the availability, comprehensiveness and proximity of special programs for their children. In some school systems, all of these programs are self-contained, or available within the school system itself. In others, the handicapped students are transported outside the school system in order to gain access to a full curriculum of educational programming. Although questions are sometimes asked about programs for the "gifted and talented," the absence of regional or national standards precludes data comparisons. It is suggested that after the other data items are reviewed, parents of children with special needs visit the school programs.

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